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The Salt Lake Tribune

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- These are enchanted times for New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson.

He and his "new best friend," Republican California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, just made international headlines for their ambitious call to increase the use of renewable energy in the American West.

Last week, Richardson got a standing ovation at the first-ever North American Energy Summit, sponsored by the Western Governors Association, which he chairs. And within a month or so, he could be running for vice president of the United States.

Richardson is reportedly on the shortlist of candidates being considered by presidential hopeful Sen. John Kerry. Though Richardson has denied he is interested in the job, it is an intriguing choice for the Democratic ticket. His Latino roots could help Kerry take Florida. His Western credentials would secure electoral votes in New Mexico, which Democratic candidate Al Gore barely won in 2000, and improve Kerry's odds in Arizona and Nevada, which Gore narrowly lost.

If not on the Democratic ticket, Richardson would be a top contender for a spot in a Kerry Cabinet, most likely as secretary of state, energy or the interior.

Richardson's résumé is rich. During the Clinton administration, he served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and as secretary of energy. He negotiated the release of hostages and political prisoners in places such as Iraq, North Korea and Cuba. Four times, he was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

During a break at last week's energy summit in New Mexico, Richardson kicked back on a couch in his hotel room, lit up a Cohiba cigar and discussed some issues with The Salt Lake Tribune:

Q: Are you still not interested in the vice president job?

A: I think that's still the case. I have an unfinished agenda here in New Mexico, an unfinished agenda as chair

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of the Western Governors. I'm very committed to the clean-energy initiative. And though I'm flattered, I just feel my commitment is to New Mexico. . . . I've only been governor for 14 months.

Q: What kind of person do you think Kerry needs for vice president?

A: First, such a person has to be qualified to be president, in case of an emergency.

Second, such a person has to be able to talk positively about

hope and opportunity and a message of change. Third, there has to be personal chemistry between the nominee and the running mate. . . . Lastly, there's vote-getting ability and regional ability.

Q: Which region do you think his running mate should come from?

A: Ideally, there are three options. . . . You're either going to pursue a Midwest strategy, or a Western strategy or you're going to pursue a Southern strategy.

Q: If he decides on a Western strategy, which candidate do you think would be the strong one?

A: Well I believe that Gov. [Janet] Napolitano of Arizona would be strong. . . . [Iowa] Gov. [Tom] Vilsack. . . . Iowa is not quite the West, but he has farming, rural routes that I think are quite important.

Q: You're pushing for clean, renewable energy while criticizing some of the Bush administration's oil and gas drilling projects. Where else do you disagree with Bush's energy policy?

A: The policy is much too oriented toward drilling and production and there's not sufficient commitment to energy efficiency and renewable energy and conservation. I think there needs to be a more suitable balance. I'm for strong oil and gas drilling. We do need more production. I'm for the Alaska natural gas pipeline.

Q: You're against [drilling in] ANWR (the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge), right?

A: Yes, I'm against ANWR. I just think there are certain areas, like ANWR, like the Otero Mesa in New Mexico. We have sufficient areas in the West to drill, and we don't have to go into sensitive ecological areas.

Q: To what extent did the war in Iraq have to do with our over-dependence on foreign oil?

A: We're clearly too dependent on foreign oil. Close to 60 percent of our energy needs come from oil, and we need to diversify and we need to develop more production in America in renewable energy and alternative sources of energy. We also need to find more stable areas in the Persian Gulf and the Middle East. OPEC has behaved in a very damaging way to American interests and international interests by lowering production, which means OPEC is very comfortable at \$40 per barrel of oil and very excessive natural gas prices, and that's not good for the world economy, for consumer countries, for producer countries. . . . The Bush administration needs to be stronger in its jawboning of OPEC. I would also consider using the strategic petroleum reserve, not to affect prices and not to sell

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oil but to trade oil on the oil market as we did in the Clinton administration. . . . The Bush administration instead continues to buy oil for the reserve at \$40 a barrel, an excessive amount.

Q: Was the U.S. justified in invading and occupying Iraq?

A: I supported the president when he went into Iraq. However I don't think there's a plan for reconstruction and for rebuilding Iraq. We went in without an endgame, without a game plan. We didn't have international support. I think that was a big mistake. We should get our allies and NATO and the [United Nations] involved in this transition but it doesn't seem to be happening. I worry that we are turning over Iraq to our enemies in June. The Sunnis and the Shiites are ironically combining forces to hurt us and possibly even conduct a terrorist act against us.

Q: How should the U.S. handle the current hostage crisis in Iraq?

A: You don't negotiate directly with hostages. You don't trade [for Iraqi prisoners]. . . . However, that doesn't mean you don't use intermediaries and the UN and special envoys to make your case. It doesn't mean you don't get other Iraqis to intervene on your behalf.

Q: How has the U.S.-Iraq policy affected America's position in the world?

A: It's hurt us. We right now have serious credibility gaps in Latin America, in the Persian Gulf, especially in the Muslim areas. We're viewed regrettably as a bully rather than as the leader of a democratic nation. We shunned NATO, we've snubbed our noses at the UN. Our position in Europe is one of the weakest it's been. . . . We need a dramatic change in our foreign policy, not necessarily having a multilateral-only policy but using international institutions like NATO and the UN to advance our interests when we need to. Right now we shun any international organization. We're going it alone. It's costing taxpayers enormous amounts of money. It's costing soldiers' lives.

Q: What else can we do to improve our position in the world?

A: We should eliminate the doctrine of pre-emption and using military force as an initial step almost all the time. We need to use diplomacy . . . and we need to use our economic power to achieve our goals. We need to respect international institutions. I'd rejoin the Kyoto treaty [on global warming] . . . expand the security council of the United Nations, find more productive roles for the World Bank and the [International Monetary Fund] to really participate in developing the Third World. I'd have a stronger economic relationship with the [European Union]. . . . I'd just make America more internationalist.

Q: Since you're smoking a Cohiba, what would you do with Cuba?

A: I would continue pressing Castro on human rights. I think his record is abominable. But I believe the best way to change Cuba is to consider some openings, perhaps some economic openings, rather than isolating it.

Q: Would you lift the travel ban?

A: Yes.

Q: Besides energy, where has Bush failed domestically?

A: With the budget deficit, failing to balance the budget. We have an enormous debt. Outsourcing of jobs. Jobs leaving America. Not having a manufacturing policy to keep jobs in this country. I believe the biggest problem is the huge national debt that has been brought on by tax cuts that are not paid for. . . . The Bush permanent tax cuts are geared to the upper brackets only and they're not paid for. I think it's folly."

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